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Posted on Tue, Jan. 18, 2005

Fruit of the vine might supplant tobacco

MIKE RUTLEDGE
Associated Press

ALEXANDRIA, Ky. - Larry Leap and his brothers axed and chain-sawed the hillside behind his home in a subdivision five years ago. Then they planted a vineyard.

"I have 1 acre here," said Leap, owner of the Lost Heritage Vineyards wine label. "What I tried to prove to everybody is that if I can grow grapes on this hillside, then - by golly - you can grow 'em better someplace else" in northern Kentucky.

Leap and others with the Northern Kentucky Vintners & Grape Growers Association envision vineyards across northern Kentucky - especially areas around Camp Springs and Melbourne in Campbell County, where German immigrants grew many grapes through the 1800s.

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They have been spreading word about the local history of grape growing, which featured vineyards along the Ohio River from Boone County in Kentucky and Hamilton County in Ohio eastward to Brown County.

Leap, who worked in California for the Ernest & Julio Gallo and Coastal Ridge wineries, is engaged with several local growers to produce enough grapes to expand his operation, which turned out 1,500 12-bottle cases of wine in 2004.

Grapes are one crop that Kentucky farms can use as they move away from the collapsing enterprise of farming tobacco, state officials say.

Jason Schnelle, owner of Fort Thomas Wine & Spirits, has been impressed by Leap's wines, particularly the vidal blanc, whose grapes come from the Melbourne vineyards of Dennis Walter.

"The vidal blanc is amazing," Schnelle said. "It's semisweet with some flavors of peach and apricot.

"Vidal blanc has a similar taste profile to a riesling - and for the price (\$12.99), I think it's a great value compared to any of the rieslings that we carry."

Leap said his winery is operating "at what I call the boutique level. We probably don't make any vintages right now more than 250 cases. That's probably the maximum I've ever made."

Ray and Nancy Sand plan to plant vidal blanc and cabernet franc this spring on their 27-acre property in the California area of Campbell County - with hopes of reaping a grape harvest in three years. They are thankful for help from other growers, such as Walter.

"Surprisingly enough, he shares all his information with me, to help me, so you don't have that isolation effect," said Ray Sand, who works in the refrigeration industry and learned about the possibilities while helping Leap with a cooler. "I think we'll really enjoy it."

Nancy Sand agrees: "We have four children at home that are just getting old enough to get in and learn to work, and it's a good family thing to do together and teach them the value of hard work and what you can produce out of that."

"And," she adds hopefully, "a college-education fund."

Kentucky officials have enough hope for the state's wine future that they invested \$785,000 of

tobacco-transition funds in mid-2003 with the Kentucky Grape and Wine Council to hire a state viticulturist (who can guide vineyard development and educate growers) and an enologist (who can help wineries make high-quality products).

"We had a wine industry here," Walter said. "It's not like we're inventing the wheel. It was here once before. We've got technology that makes it easier to have it again."

Chemical treatments can deal with vineyard problems such as black rot and mildew, which ravaged vineyards in the mid-1800s. Leap says Prohibition killed the industry locally.

Campbell County Judge-executive Steve Pendery is among those hoping vineyards can help keep an agricultural flavor in his rapidly growing county.

"This offers the opportunity, because there's a pretty high payoff by the acre, that farming could actually compete with development," Pendery said. "And that's great news for everybody."

Leap said, under the old tobacco support system, an acre of good tobacco yielded an average of about \$4,200.

"On a good acre of vidal, we'll give you probably \$6,000 an acre. And for cabernet franc it's going to be somewhere around \$8,000 an acre," he said.

"It's a small-acres, high-income type thing," said Mac Stone, director of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture's Division of Value-Added Plant Production.

Information from: The Kentucky Enquirer, <http://www.enquirer.com>



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